

City's German club flourished for 60 years

From the writings of the late Jack Rudolph:

For nearly 60 years, the Green Bay Turner Society was a proud and happy fixture on the northwest corner of Monroe Avenue and Walnut Street.

A huge, boxy building, the structure was both a symbol and a gathering place for one of the most remarkable organizations in the history of the city.

The facility had long outlived its usefulness when it was razed in 1938. In its time, the Green Bay Turner Society contributed much to the cultural and social life of Green Bay.

In 1852, eight young men, recent arrivals from Germany, met in the old Blesch Brewery in Fort Howard and formed a "turnerein" on a model of the gymnastics clubs they had known back home. They were Gerhard Oldenburg, Louis and Albert Scheller, Ernest and August Straubel, Herbert Pfothhauer, Franz Morell and Theodore Klassen.

They solved the problem for the majority in 1856 by shifting the base across the river, leasing a lot from Daniel Whitney on Walnut Street, near Quincy, where they erected a small hall.

The Green Bay Turner Society always dated its origin from August 16, 1860, the date of its incorporation. When three German societies merged that year, they had to expand facilities.

The organization had three divisions, a gymnastic "turnverein" of young men, a Harmonic (dramatic) Society and the Fidelia (singing) Society. In 1861 they built a new and larger hall on the southeast corner of Jefferson and Pine Streets.

By 1870, membership had grown so much that they had to build their third and last clubhouse on the northwest corner of Walnut and Monroe.

Turner Hall, as it was always called, was a magnificent building in its day with the largest auditorium in town and one of the most completely equipped stages north of Chicago. For years the hall was a center of much club, social and community activity.

For nearly three-quarters of a century, a highlight of the Green Bay social season was the elaborate Turner masquerade ball. Inaugurated about 1862, the ball was a yearly event until 1935. It was always lavish, colorful and crowded. The party ran two nights, one open to the public and the other restricted to members and guests. Invitations to the private affair were highly prized, and the public nights attracted as many as 2,000 dancers and spectators.

The Turners staged amateur dramatics,



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importing professional German opera and dramatic companies offering choral singing. The first symphony concerts in the city were held at Turner Hall in the 1880's when the society brought in the famous Bach Orchestra of Milwaukee. Several state Turner "saingerfests" singing festivals were held. The old Hagemeister Park pavilion which later served as a National Guard armory was built specifically for the festival of 1901.

World War I dealt the Turner Society a mortal blow. Although highly respected, the society was exclusive and clannish and the war-born wave of anti-German sentiment took its toll.

Turner membership was suspended in 1917-1918. After the war, the Turners never recovered. The younger generations drifted away. The big hall was closed much of the time and gradually fell into disuse. After the Columbus Club was built the hall's function as a civic auditorium ended.

By 1934, membership that once numbered in the hundreds was down to less than 50. The society was virtually inactive. The building was finally sold and torn down in 1938.

In 1939, a few survivors met one evening in the Paul Hoffman Hotel on South Washington Street and dissolved their cherished association. The Turner Society went out as it had lived, proud and with its head high.



Turner Hall, home for the Green Bay Turner Society, was on the corner of Monroe Ave. and Walnut Street. The hall, built in 1852, was torn down in 1938.

With the largest auditorium in town and one of the most completely equipped stages north of Chicago, Turner Hall was a center for much social and community activity.

